
New Hampshire
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Common Potato Has American Roots in New Hampshire

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The common Potato, Irish Potato, White Potato, known to plant taxonomists by its Latin name *Solanum tuberosum*, is one of the world's most important plants. A member of the Solanaceae family of plants the potato is a close relative of the eggplant, pepper, tobacco and tomato. Believed to have been originally domesticated from wild plants by the Inca of South America, the potato was widely grown throughout the Andes. When Spanish explorers conquered and colonized South America they brought the potato back to Europe in the 1500's.

Over the next several centuries the potato gradually became accepted by Europeans and widely planted throughout the continent. English and Irish settlers then brought the potato to the new settlements in North America and the travels of the potato came almost full circle. Legend has it that the first instance of growing Irish potatoes in the colonies occurred in Londonderry, New Hampshire in the mid-1700's – brought by the Scots-Irish settlers of the town.

Ireland in the 19th century experienced a population boom fueled largely by the ability of the poor, rocky, cool soils to produce good crops of potatoes. The emergence of a fungal disease known as late blight devastated the Irish potato crops for several straight years in the 1840's resulting in widespread famine, disease and a human exodus from the rocky uplands that could no longer feed its people without the potato. Of the approximately three million people in Ireland at the beginning of the famine, reportedly one million perished and another million emigrated, the majority of them to the United States.

Today, Americans are not nearly as dependent on the potato as many of our ancestors were. More glamorous vegetables compete for our food-shopping dollar. Yet, the potato remains an inexpensive, nutritious and tasty staple of most American diets in one form or another.

Fresh potatoes are available in several types. The common round white potato is commonly grown throughout New England, especially in northern Maine's Aroostook County, and is considered a good all-around variety – suitable for baking, boiling, mashing or frying. The russet potato or long white is best suited for baking. Newer introductions include yellow fleshed and red skinned varieties and more recently the reintroduction of older heirloom varieties such as fingerlings.

U.S. fall potato production is lead by Idaho, followed by Washington, Wisconsin and Colorado. Maine ranks eighth in fall production. California supplies the bulk of the summer crop of potatoes. Potatoes harvested in late summer or early fall along the Atlantic seaboard are known as "new potatoes" – great for prompt use but not for long-term storage. New Hampshire no longer produces large quantities of potatoes for wholesale markets yet many vegetable growers in the state raise excellent fresh potatoes for retail sale.

Thrifty shoppers can benefit from buying large sacks of 20 or 50 lbs. in the fall at a low price per pound and storing them at home if a suitable storage place is available. Store potatoes in a dark place, ideally with

temperature around 40 degrees F with high humidity. A corner of a cellar is usually best in most homes. Do not allow potatoes to freeze or to be exposed to bright light. Sunshine or bright light will cause the surface of potatoes to turn green and develop a bitter tasting compound known as solanine. Some articles claim green potatoes to be poisonous but one would have to eat large amounts of green potato to be seriously affected by the toxin. Just the same it's best not to eat green potatoes.

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